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THE HOOK IN THE BAIT

By W. DOUGLAS NEWTON

PHILLIP—with two “I’s” and the word said slow—adjusted his beautiful tie, patted his unimpeachable hair, and arranged his *dolce far niente* face into lines of the lugubrious and the melancholy. So, a little dispirited in air, he walked into M’selle Sophie’s pinky drawing-room.

M’selle Sophie from her couch regarded him carefully from narrowed eyes until he looked at her, then her vivid, pale-dusky face welcomed him startlingly with the glowing warmth of her smile—a gay smile, but a touch of secret sympathy and understanding of heart-sore Phillip in it.

She did the change rather quickly, as though she had a switch somewhere under her laceries for just this sort of smile (with others), and had clicked it on. Phillip, of course, would not notice this quick psychological change. Phillip was such a “pretty boy,” and his clothes were so ravishing, and his boots so glossy in their varnish, that he would notice nothing unless it were in a mirror before him. She took his hand, and she was, perhaps, a little excited. When a “pretty boy” needed sympathy, and a beautiful woman could give him it, then that woman could mould the heart and the mind of the boy. She had known this “Phel-lep” some time, but never, till now, had she the chance of exercising the power of her sympathy. It was a lovely moment.

“But Phel-lep, he is *triste* to-day. My poor Phel-lep. I must be kind to him. An’ he will tell me all about it, and it will be all right—*n’est-ce-pas?*” she said, in her rich voice. A splendid tool, her voice.

“A bit taken in the flank, what,” said Phillip inconsolably. “Oh, nothin’ at all. Nothin’ at all—probably means I shall be sent off to the muddiest trench, and will get it in the neck from the heftiest ‘crump,’ but nothin’ at all, really. Don’t let it interrupt the happiness of China tea. Let us be gay.”

She poured him out tea. The charming, warming, father-confessor smile was on her lips. Perhaps her eyes were narrow. But he was “preety,” and full of clothes, and wrongs, and so ingenuously absent in the brain department, he would not see. He was one of those who would never see.

“Oh, Phel-lep, you have it badly, so. But you have me to come to—that is good. I will soothe you with the tea that is Chinese—and me. Will you have a crumpet—they have been specially imported for starving Staff-Officers who have it badly.”

“They may cure me, but I doubt it,” said Phillip sadly. “This is an affair of—what do you French folk call it?—oh, I know, of the soul. A muddy trench and a *fizz-bang* is awful bad for the soul, and I am due for both. All because—but why be lethal in tone, why worry?”

M’selle was distinctly excited. But she was clever, too.

“As you will,” she said. “It might spoil the crumpets. But I am ready to be nice to you, Phel-lep, if you like. Regard me, please, as the leetle lady who soothes—with tea or with the soul. That is it. But we will not ‘why worry’ if you do not need.”

She knew she was quite clever. When “preety boys” who are English begin to

grumble, nothing of this world can stop them. When English boys, who are so ingenuous, begin to air their wrongs they will not stop at saying anything—anything. She knew. Her loveliness and her sympathy had given her experience. Her experience had given her tact. She left it all to him. That was the best way.

Phillip did heroically. He endeavoured to talk of other things, the weather, for instance, that splendid old national topic, but in the end he came round to the inevitable. He said:

"As a matter of fact, though you would not guess it, a Staff-Major of the most carnivorous type has been biting me."

She laughed—but not outside—at the simplicity of the boy. *She* not guess!—but that was *drole*. Her mouth and her eyes, however, were rich and quick in sympathy.

"Oh, but that horr-ed Major again. He is a monster." Her fingers clasped his gently—the right pressure, no more. "He has been grinding your nose down again. He has been over-labouring you. The br-rute! An' I have not noticed how tired you have been looking until now, from his working you so hard."

Phillip's perfect nose—the nose that has conquered a thousand and one flappers—twitched a little. There was humour in him; at the idea of tiredness, no doubt.

"Oh, Lord, no, M'selle Sophie," he said cheerily. "It was the Major who got tired. Staff-Majors are very subject to attrition. He tried to function with abominable earnestness, but he did not tire me. Still, he was thoroughly pungent. Said bitter things, you know. I gathered from him the reason why the Allies don't move in the West. The answer is simple. It is me."

A real fleck of bitterness at the end. He had had a bad ragging, M'selle could see. His soul was raw and rebellious. How she knew these "preety boys"! She rested her warm shoulder against him, and her fingers touched his.

"Poor Phel-lep," she whispered gently. "Was he ver' stupid—or was it you?"

She did not think her excitement showed. In any case, he was not the man to see it if it did.

"Heavens no! Nothin' to be stupid about, you know. Just an ordinary, technical bit of job-work, you know. I can't tell you much about it, because it's mixed up with something big. Somethin' new, too."

How her heart jumped. But he would not know it jumped. He was the injured baby fingering his wrongs. And then she could be wise.

"Of course you would not tell me anything," she said gravely. "That would not be right, eh?" She smiled a little. "And it would not be very meaning, would it? If it is so technical—*belas*, how do I grasp it? I am trying to make amends in my war studies, but the years of neglect in Paris, they cannot be overcome. I feel so ignorant—so cheap, isn't it?"

Phillip beamed on her. Somewhere deep in his Anglican mind she could see that a compliment of the delicacy of a sledgehammer was evolving.

"But we like you like that," he said. "We like you pretty—and unmilitary. Otherwise, how could we trot along and work off what the Majors give us? This thing now—if you understood all the technical jumble you might get something out of the sketchy bits I tell you. Whereas you don't, and I get sympathy without danger. Nice for me—rather boring for you, what?"

M'selle was thrilled. But only underneath her veil of sympathy. This pretty, stupid boy, he was on the verge of talk. She knew, from her experience she knew all the symptoms. A Commander-in-Chief from the First Angel Army of Heaven could not stop an Englishman once he had got to this point in her presence, and under the tenderness of her eyes. She knew. She was right.

"Well, roughly—has to be roughly, y'know—it's like this," said Phillip, endeavouring to circumvent Nature and appear wise. "Old man Ogilbie (that's the Major chap) put a job on to me. He shouldn't have done it, but he's a miker—that's slang; it means that he has got something better to do in a deck-chair—he's a miker, and he shifted a whole lot of this job on to me. He said in his haughty way: 'Do it one-time, me lad; the C.G.S. has immediate need of it. . . .'"

"I am ver' stupid," said M'selle with a plaintive smile. "But, please; C.G.S., what is that?" M'selle was almost holding her breath. But clever and ignorant questions had to be put. It would show how stupid she was—how impressive he was.

"C.G.S.—oh, one of our decorative effects, Chief of the General Staff, you know. A technical insect." Her soul smiled as he passed off the simple officer gentleman who has command of the active operations on to her callow mind. "Well, he said, the C. G.S. had to have all particulars *with* diagrams—hard, nigger work diagrams—in fifteen hours. Fifteen hours, mind you, and four divisions had to be concentrated, routes worked out on a pinched front, and the guns and the "hows" figured in, and—and all that. A pocket plan by Napoleon done in fifteen hours. Ye godlets!"

She was almost suffocating. But she was gentle and sweet, and her hand touched his.

"It soundstruly enor-rmous," shesmiled. "Is it?"

"Is it!" he echoed scornfully. "Is it! Ye little gods!"

"I am not a *general*. A little Parisian butterfly—so you see it is, as you say, all *grec*." Magnificent how she kept up the smile.

"Well, he blurted impulsively, carried away by his wrongs and her sympathy.

"Well, here's just an outline of what a feller had to do." His field sketch-book was out. His pen was marking queer, but firm and skilful lines on a virgin page. "See, you've got a front like this, and roads like this—all coming from different places, like this. See how narrow the front is."

"What are those black, blobby things, please?" she said sweetly, holding her heart normal with her will.

"A village. That circle with an X on it stands for a mill. It's partly smashed now. The roads come in through cuttings—lines round shading always mean cuttings—that makes the roll-up more beastly to handle. But that's not the point of the trick. See how the roads come from all the most impossible spots on earth. And all the soldiers and guns and carts and things have to be bunged along at certain times, or the roads jam, and yet have to arrive at the tick, or everything comes ungummed. And they have to be bunched"—he was making strokes on the growing map as he spoke—"so that they will be ready for use when the whistle says 'Go.' Oh there's an immortal lot of complications. And I had to grind out the facts and the figures in fifteen hours. And that slaughterous Major"

M'selle leaned back gracefully. Phillip saw that she was really being a dear, but that yawn-preventing was difficult. She looked at him quickly and smiled, as one saying, "No, I am not truly rude, but you know." She was clever. She said quickly, to cover up that embryo yawn:

"Frightfully complicated, yes. I should go mad only to look at the thing. But why should the Major anger with you? You have it so well, Phillip."

Phillip remembered he had committed the felony of talking shop. He did his best to apologize. But really he was full of it.

"Aw'fully boring, eh? Aw'fully sorry to pile it up on you. Only you help a chap so.

... Well, it was all right really. But I'd hurried up the Mudland Division. They should have been *there*, 3.15." He put the figures on his little map. "I put 'em 2.55. Of course, one has to be almighty careful on a big move like this, M'selle. But I ask you, the whole job in fifteen hours ... and not a 'Thank you'.... His job too, Miker. ... But, well, it's aw'fully boring."

"Poor Phel-lep," she said gently. "No wonder he want his tea. No wonder he feel 'limp-rag.' I would like to talk to your old Major." Phillip grinned rather discreetly. "Oh, but I would be angry with him."

She was charming and sympathetic again. She was gay with him. But still she must use her wits. He was tearing up the map. He had brain enough for that, but still she must try and make him play into her hand. He had torn it into large pieces, and he was looking about. She was glad that the season of fires was done. She watched him in his hesitation, and then she cried with charming warning:

"If you drop as much as one piece of that nasty paper on my good carpet—oh, I shall be a Major to you."

"Must tear this up," he said apologetically. ("Oh, like a big dull boy," she thought. "Couldn't possibly leave it as it was.")

"What are my waste-paper baskets for, then?" she demanded. "And I have so great a number of them. Please find one ... and come and sit beside me ... we will forget all this horridness." She did not want him to sit beside her. But carefulness, it was necessary.

Phillip came, with all the glory of an apparition, before the Staff-Major two days later. He said:

"Well, old thing, I have tidings of great joy. You will be glad that I came along here to look after the G.-in C. when you have heard my simple story."

Major Ogilbie, the carnivorous, looked

up from the latest of Kirchner's darlings.

"How do, Phillip," he said. "I wondered what it was dazzling the sunlight. What haven't you been doing now?"

"I've been Le Queuxing. Oh, really well, my dear Watson."

"Bit rocky about the author line," said the Major. "But what's doing."

Phillip produced a map. It was a map done on a page of a field sketch-book, and it had been torn up into large pieces before it had been pasted on to a sheet of thin paper. The Staff-Major glanced at it and became black.

"That," he said, "looks like the concentration plan for our next big push. Looks very much like it, but not quite."

"I wouldn't risk the 'quite,'" said Phillip simply.

"You wouldn't?"

"That beautiful map is mine. The map only, mark you. The jig-saw bit, the pasting-up touch, is a lady's. A most beautiful lady, who betrays the innocence of extreme youth. I am the extreme youth."

The Staff-Major's face was ugly as he stood up.

"Manwaering, this doesn't look pretty. You'll have to say something more precise about it all. This sort of thing has an infernal black name."

Phillip (the name one didn't know him by was Manwaering) was as serene and unruffled as at any time in his history. But there was a grimness in the lips under the corn-coloured moustache.

"Infernally black, sure," he admitted. "It's meant blackness all along. That's why I watched it. You remember poor Longman. Remember, perhaps, he was on a job that somehow got across the sandbags to *them*. Recollect how the whispers got about, and how he decided it would be better if he chucked G.H.Q. and went along to try-out in the trenches. He got killed in the firing-line, I remember that

particularly. Longman was my pal. . . . Well, Longman had a love affair, a semi-love affair worked on the distinctly quiet pedal. Not many folk knew it. . . . Only I happened to know it. And there was Brewer, too. Something went wrong with him. . . . and he went too. He wasn't my pal. But I connected up his case, and there was a love affair with him. Nobody knew about that—but I nosed it out. Then there was Hooke. . . .”

“A bad case, Hooke,” said the Major.

“Rotten bad. Worse than the others . . . he wasn't killed. Well his affair was the same. Love in Secrecy—then something going all sideways . . . and the end of him.”

The Staff-Major looked keenly at Phillip. Phillip was pleasant and pink and innocent. Only his chin was hard.

“All nice boys, weren't they, those three—two of 'em gone West, poor fellers, and the third, worse? Pretty and natty and neat in their clothes. I'm pretty and natty and neat in my clothes, also. I thought I was just the chap to go into the matter. I'd have a discreet love affair, also. A love affair with a lady who likes nice English boys, because they're 'preety' and innocent, and because their baby mouths blab important things when she is clever and sympathetic and beautiful over their troubles. English officer boys are easy sport—so sure of themselves, and yet so simple. I was so simple. I thought at first that she'd find me too simple. But she never suspected a man who does his hair in the way I do of being anything but fool-

ish. She played me pretty, and I let her. But when she swallowed me whole she didn't know I was only the sprat on the hook. And the sprat on the hook caught her. There's the map I drew for her—but which she wasn't interested in. And here's a paper with all the information I poured out to her—which made her yawn as I told it. She's pieced it together prettily. It was mainly N.D.G., and I had already made all arrangements to collect what came out of the house before I went into it; but she put it together wonderfully, don't you think? Missed nothin'. And she was sending it to the German lines. She's the spy who bled Longman and Brewer and killed them, and bled Hooke and sent him off in shame from decent society. She's a spy, and I've got her. Her real name is probably Fraulein Sophie, but she calls herself M'selle Sophie. And this is her address.”

“Smart work, Phillip,” said the Major, in the nearest approach to admiration a Major can have.

“Not at all,” said Phillip. “I can do any amount of little things like that. Do them in the morning instead of Muller—and Longman was my pal, you see. . . .”

The Major saw. He nipped into the Adjutant-General's suite to get things square for clever M'selle Sophie. And Phillip walked off. He went into town and bought a new and more terrible kind of squash-hat. But he didn't stick a feather in it. Feathers were *outré*.

The Sketch, London.